

Beyond the Dead Reef

by James Tiptree, Jr

My informant was, of course, spectacularly unreliable.

The only character reference I have for him comes from the intangible nuances of a small restaurant-owner's remarks, and the only confirmation of his tale lies in the fact that an illiterate fishing-guide appears to believe it. If I were to recount all the reasons why no sane mind should take it seriously, we could never begin. So I will only report the fact that today I found myself shuddering with terror when a perfectly innocent sheet of seaworn plastic came slithering over my snorkeling-reef, as dozens have done for years—and get on with the story.

I met him one evening this December at the Cozumel *Buzo*, on my first annual supply trip. As usual, the *Buzo's* outer rooms were jammed with tourist divers and their retinues and gear. That's standard. *El Buzo* means, roughly, The Diving, and the *Buzo* is their place. Marcial's big sign in the window reads "DIWERS UELCOME! BRING YR FISH WE COK WITH CAR. FIRST DRINK FREE!"

Until he went in for the "Divvers," Marcial's had been a small quiet place where certain delicacies like stone-crab could be at least semi-legally obtained. Now he did a roaring trade in snappers and groupers cooked to order at outrageous fees, with a flourishing sideline in fresh fish sales to the neighborhood each morning.

The "roaring" was quite literal. I threaded my way through a crush of burly giants and giantesses of all degrees of nakedness, hairiness, age, proficiency, and inebriation—all eager to share their experiences and plans in voices powered by scuba-deafened ears and Marcial's free drink, beneath which the sound-system could scarcely be heard at full blast. (Marcial's only real expense lay in first-drink liquor so strong that few could recall whether what they ultimately ate bore any resemblance to what they had given him to cook.) Only a handful were sitting down yet, and the amount of gear underfoot and on the walls would have stocked three sports shops. This was not mere exhibitionism; on an island chronically short of washers, valves, and other spare parts the diver who lets his gear out of his sight is apt to find it missing in some vital.

I paused to allow a young lady to complete her massage of the neck of a youth across the aisle who was deep in talk with three others, and had time to notice the extraordinary number of heavy spear-guns racked about. Oklahomans, I judged, or perhaps South Florida. But then I caught clipped New England from the center group. Too bad; the killing mania seems to be spreading yearly, and the armament growing ever more menacing and efficient. When I inspected their platters, however, I saw the usual array of lavishly garnished lobsters and common fish. At least they had not yet discovered what to eat.

The mermaiden blocking me completed her task—unthanked—and I continued on my way in the little inner sanctum Marcial keeps for his old clientele. As the heavy doors cut off the uproar, I saw that this room was full too—three tables of dark-suited Mexican businessmen and a decorous family of eight, all quietly intent on their plates. A lone customer sat at the small table by the kitchen door, leaving an empty seat and a child's chair. He was a tall, slightly balding Anglo some years younger than I, in a very decent sports jacket. I recalled having seen him about now and then on my banking and shopping trips to the island.

Marcial telegraphed me a go-ahead nod as he passed through laden with more drinks, so I approached.

"Mind if I join you?"

He looked up from his stone-crab and gave me a slow, owlish smile.

"Welcome. A *diverse* welcome," he enunciated carefully. The accent was vaguely British, yet agreeable. I also perceived that he was extremely drunk, but in no common way.

"Thanks."

As I sat down I saw that he was a diver too, but his gear was stowed so unobtrusively I hadn't noticed it. I tried to stack my own modest snorkel outfit neatly, pleased to note that, like me, he seemed to carry no spear-gun. He watched me attentively, blinking once or twice, and then returned to an exquisitely exact dissection of his stone-crab.

When Marcial brought my own platter of crab—unasked—we engaged in our ritual converse. Marcial's English is several orders of magnitude better than my Spanish, but he always does me the delicate courtesy of allowing me to use his tongue. How did I find my rented *casita* on the coco ranch this year? Fine. How goes the tourist business this year? Fine. I learn from Marcial: the slight pause before his answer in a certain tone, meant that in fact the tourist business was lousy so far, but would hopefully pick up; I used the same to convey that in fact my *casa* was in horrible shape but repairable. I tried to cheer him by saying that I thought the *Buzo* would do better than the general *turismo*, because the diving enthusiasm was spreading in the States. "True," he conceded. "So long as they don't discover the other places—like Belize." Here he flicked a glance at my companion, who gave his solemn blink. I remarked that my country's politics were in disastrous disarray, and he conceded the same for his; the *Presidente* and his pals had just made off with much of the nation's treasury. And I expressed the hope that Mexico's new oil would soon prove a great boon. "Ah, but it will be a long time before it gets to the little people like us," said Marcial, with so much more than his normal acerbity that I refrained from my usual joke about his having a Swiss bank account. The uproar from the outer rooms had risen several decibels, but just before Marcial had to leave he paused and said in a totally different voice, "My grandson Antonito Vincente has four teeth!"

His emotion was so profound that I seized his free hand and shook it lightly, congratulating him in English. And then he was gone, taking on his "Mexican waiter" persona quite visibly as he passed the inner doors.

As we resumed our attention to the succulence before us, my companion said in his low, careful voice, "Nice chap, Marcial. He likes you."

"It's mutual," I told him between delicate mouthfuls. Stone-crab is not to be gulped. "Perhaps because I'm old enough to respect the limits where friendship ends and the necessities of life take over."

"I say, that's rather good," my companion chuckled. "Respect for the limits where friendship ends and the necessities of life take over, eh? Very few Yanks do, you know. At least the ones we see down here."

His speech was almost unslurred, and there were no drinks before him on the table. We chatted idly a bit more. It was becoming apparent that we would finish simultaneously and be faced with the prospect of leaving together, which could be awkward, if he, like me, had no definite plans for the evening.

The dilemma was solved when my companion excused himself momentarily just as Marcial happened by.

I nodded to his empty chair. "Is he one of your old customers, Sefior Marcial?"

As always Marcial understood the situation at once. "One of the oldest," he told me, and added low-voiced, "*muy buenas gentes*—a really good guy. *Un poco de dificultades*—" he made an almost imperceptible gesture of drinking—"but *controlado*. And he has also *negocios*—I do not know all, but some are important for his country. —So you really like the crab?" he concluded in his normal voice.

"We are honored."

My companion was emerging from the rather dubious regions that held the *excusado*.

Marcial's recommendation was good enough for me. Only one puzzle remained: what was his country? As we both refused *dulce* and coffee, I suggested that he might care to stroll down to the marina with me and watch the sunset.

"Good thought."

We paid up Marcial's outrageous bills and made our way through the exterior Bedlam, carrying our gear. One of the customers was brandishing his spear-gun as he protested his bill. Marcial seemed to have lost all his English except the words "Police," and cooler heads were attempting to calm the irate one. "All in a night's work," my companion commented as we emerged into a blaze of golden light.

The marina to our left was a simple L-shaped *muelle*, or pier, still used by everything from dinghies to commercial fishermen and baby yachts. It will be a pity when and if the town decides to separate the sports tourist-trade from the more interesting working craft. As we walked out toward the pier in the last spectacular color of the tropic sunset over the mainland, the rigging lights of a cruise ship standing out in the channel came on, a fairyland illusion over the all-too-dreary reality.

"They'll be dumping and cleaning out their used bunkers tonight," my companion said, slurring a trifle now. He had a congenial walking gait, long-strided but leisurely. I had the impression that his drunkenness had returned slightly; perhaps the fresh air. "Damn crime."

"I couldn't agree more," I told him. "I remember when we used to start snorkeling and scuba diving right off the shore here—you could almost wade out to untouched reefs. And now—"

There was no need to look; one could smell it. The effluvia of half a dozen hotels and the town behind ran out of pipes that were barely covered at low tide; on a few parrot fish, who can stand anything, remained by the hotel-side restaurants to feed on the crusts the tourists threw them from their tables. And only the very ignorant would try out—once—the dilapidated Sunfish and water-ski renters who plied the small stretches of beach between hotels.

We sat down on one of the near benches to watch a commercial trawler haul net. I had been for some time aware that my companion, while of largely British culture, was not completely Caucasian. There was a minute softness to the voice, a something not quite dusky about hair and fingernails—not so much as to be what in my youth was called "A touch of tarbrush," but nothing that originated in Yorkshire, either. Nor was it the obvious Hispano-Indian. I recollected Marcial's earlier speech and enlightenment came.

"Would I be correct in taking Marcial's allusions to mean that you are a British Honduran—forgive me, I mean a Belizeian, or Belizan?"

"Nothing to forgive, old chap. We haven't existed long enough to get our adjectives straight."

"May god send you do." I was referring to the hungry maws of Guatemala and Honduras, the little country's big neighbors, who had the worst of intentions toward her. "I happen to be quite a fan of your country. I had some small dealings there after independence which involved getting all my worldly goods out of your customs on a national holiday, and people couldn't have been finer to me."

"Ah yes. Belize the blessed, where sixteen nationalities live in perfect racial harmony. The odd thing is, they do."

"I could see that. But I couldn't quite count all sixteen."

"My own grandmother was a Burmese—so called. I think it was the closest grandfather could come to Black. Although the mix *is* extraordinary."

"My factor there was a very dark Hindu with red hair and a Scottish accent, named Robinson. I had to hire him in seven minutes. He was a miracle of efficiency. I hope he's still going."

"Robinson... Used to work for customs?"

"Why, yes, now you recall it."

"He's fine... Of course, we felt it when the British left. Among other things, half the WCs in the hotels broke down the first month. But there are more important things in life than plumbing."

"That I believe... But you know, I've never been sure how much help the British would have been to you. Two years before your independence I called the British Embassy with a question about your immigration laws, and believe it or not I couldn't find one soul who even knew there *was* a British Honduras, let alone that they owned it. One child finally denied it flatly and hung up. And this was their main embassy in Washington, D.C. I realized then that Britain was not only sick, but crazy."

"Actually denied our existence, eh?" My companion's voice held a depth and timbre of sadness such as I have heard only from victims of better-known world wrongs. Absently his hand went under his jacket, and he pulled out something gleaming.

"Forgive me." It was a silver flask, exquisitely plain. He uncapped and drank, a mere swallow, but, I suspected, something of no ordinary power. He licked his lips as he recapped it, and sat up straighter while he put it away.

"Shall we move along out to the end?"

"With pleasure."

We strolled on, passing a few late sports-boats disgorging hungry divers.

"I'm going to do some modest exploring tomorrow," I told him. "A guide named Jorge—" in Spanish it's pronounced Horhay— "Jorge Chuc is taking me out to the end of the north reef. He says there's a pretty little untouched spot out there. I hope so. Today I went south, it was so badly shot over I almost wept. Cripples—and of course shark everywhere. Would you believe I found a big she-turtle, trying to live with a steel bolt through her neck? I managed to catch her, but all I could do for her was pull it out. I hope she makes it."

"Bad... Turtles are tough, though. If it wasn't vital you may have saved her. But did you say that Jorge Chuc is taking you to the end of the north reef?"

"Yes, why? Isn't it any good?"

"Oh, there is one pretty spot. But there's some very bad stuff there too. If you don't mind my advice, don't go far from the boat. I mean, a couple of meters. And don't follow anything. And above all be very sure it *is* Jorge's boat."

His voice had become quite different, with almost military authority.

"A couple of meters!" I expostulated. "But—"

"I know, I know. What I don't know is why Chuc is taking you there at all." He thought for a moment.

"You haven't by any chance offended him, have you? In any way?"

"Why, no—we were out for a long go yesterday, and had a nice chat on the way back. Yes... although he is a trifle changeable, isn't he? I put it down to fatigue, and gave him some extra *dinero* for being only one party."

My companion made an untranslatable sound, compounded of dubiety, speculation, possible enlightenment, and strong suspicion.

"Did he tell you the name of that part of the reef? Or that it's out of sight of land?"

"Yes, he said it was far out. And that part of it was so poor it's called dead."

"And you chatted—forgive me, but was your talk entirely in Spanish?"

I chuckled deprecatingly. "Well, yes—I know my Spanish is pretty horrible, but he seemed to get the drift."

"Did you mention his family?"

"Oh, yes—I could draw you the whole Chuc family tree."

"Hmmm..." My companion's eyes had been searching the pier-side where the incoming boats were being secured for the night.

"Ah. There's Chuc now. This is none of my business, you understand—but do I have your permission for a short word with Jorge?"

"Why, yes. If you think it necessary."

"I do, my friend. I most certainly do."

"Carry on."

His long-legged stride had already carried him to Chuc's big skiff, the *Estrellita*. Chuc was covering his motors. I had raised my hand in greeting but he was apparently too busy to respond. Now he greeted my companion briefly, but did not turn when he clambered into the boat uninvited. I could not hear the interchange. But presently the two men were standing, faces somewhat averted from each other as they conversed. My companion made rather a long speech, ending with questions. There was little response from Chuc until a sudden outburst from him took me by surprise. The odd dialogue went on for some time after that; Chuc seemed to calm down. Then the tall Belizan waved me over.

"Will you say exactly what I tell you to say?"

"Why—" But his expression stopped me. "If you say it's important."

"It is. Can you say in Spanish, 'I ask your pardon, Mr. Chuc. I mistook myself in your language. I did not say anything of what you thought I said. Please forgive my error. And please let us be friends again.'"

"I'll try."

I stumbled through the speech, which I will not try to reproduce here, as I repeated several phrases with what I thought was better accent, and I'm sure I threw several verbs into the conditional future. Before I was through, Chuc was beginning to grin. When I came to the "friends" part he had relaxed, and after a short pause, said in very tolerable English, "I see, so I accept your apology. We will indeed be friends. It

was a regrettable error... And I advise you, do not again speak in Spanish."

We shook on it.

"Good," said my companion. "And he'll take you out tomorrow, but not the Dead Reef. And keep your hands off your wallet tonight, but I suggest liberality tomorrow eve."

We left Chuc to finish up, and paced down to a bench at the very end of the *muelle*. The last colors of evening, peaches and rose shot with unearthly green, were set off by a few low-lying clouds already in grey shadow, like sharks of the sky passing beneath a sentimental vision of bliss.

"Now what was all *that* about!" I demanded of my new friend. He was just tucking the flask away again, and shuddered lightly.

"I don't wish to seem overbearing, but *that* probably saved your harmless life, my friend. I repeat Jorge's advice—stay away from that Spanish of yours unless you are absolutely sure of being understood."

"I know it's ghastly."

"That's not actually the problem. The problem is that it isn't ghastly enough. Your pronunciation is quite fair, and you've mastered some good idioms, so people who don't know you think you speak more fluently than you do. In this case the trouble came from your damned rolled *rrrs*. Would you mind saying the words for 'but' and 'dog'?"

"*Pero... perro*. Why?"

"The difference between a rolled and a single *r*, particularly in Maya Spanish, is very slight. The upshot of it was that you not only insulted his boat in various ways, but you ended by referring to his mother as a dog... He was going to take you out beyond the Dead Reef and leave you there."

"*What?*"

"Yes. And if it hadn't been I who asked—he knows I know the story—you'd never have understood a thing. Until you turned up as a statistic."

"Oh, Jesus Christ..."

"Yes," he said dryly.

"I guess some thanks are in order," I said finally. "But words seem a shade inadequate. Have you any suggestions?"

My companion suddenly turned and gave a highly concentrated look.

"You were in World War Two, weren't you? And afterwards you worked around quite a bit." He wasn't asking me, so I kept quiet. "Right now, I don't see anything," he went on. "But just possibly I might be calling on you," he grinned, "with something you may not like."

"If it's anything I can do from a wheelchair, I won't forget."

"Fair enough. We'll say no more about it now."

"Oh yes, we will," I countered. "You may not know it, but you owe *me* something. I can smell a story when one smacks me in the face. What I want from you is the story behind this Dead Reef business, and how it is that Jorge knows you know something special about it. If I'm not asking too much? I'd really

like to end our evening with your tale of the Dead Reef."

"Oho. My error—I'd forgotten Marcial telling me you wrote... Well, I can't say I enjoy reliving it, but maybe it'll have a salutary effect on your future dealings in Spanish. The fact is, I was the one it happened to, and Jorge was driving a certain boat. You realize, though, there's not a shred of proof except my own word? And my own word—" he tapped the pocket holding his flask "—is only as good as you happen to think it is."

"It's good enough for me."

"Very well, then. Very well," he said slowly, leaning back. "It happened about three, no, four years back—by god, you know this is hard to tell, though there's not much to it." He fished in another pocket, and took out, not a flask, but the first cigarette I'd seen him smoke, a *Petit Caporal*. "I was still up to a long day's scuba then, and, like you, I wanted to explore north. I'd run into this nice, strong, young couple who wanted the same thing. Their gear was good, they seemed experienced and sensible. So we got a third tank apiece, and hired a trustable boatman—not Jorge, Victor Camul—to take us north over the worst of the reef. It wasn't so bad then, you know.

"We would be swimming north with the current until a certain point, where if you turn east, you run into a long reverse eddy that makes it a lot easier to swim back to Cozumel. And just to be extra safe, Victor was to start out up the eddy in two hours sharp to meet us and bring us home. I hadn't one qualm about the arrangements. Even the weather cooperated—not a cloud, and the forecast perfect. Of course, if you miss up around here, the next stop is four hundred miles to Cuba, but you know that; one gets used to it... By the way, have you heard they're still looking for that girl who's been gone two days on a Sunfish with no water?"

I said nothing.

"Sorry." He cleared his throat. "Well, Victor put us out well in sight of shore. We checked watches and compasses and lights. The plan was for the lad Harry to lead, Ann to follow, and me to bring up the rear. Harry had Day Glo-red shorts you could see a mile, and Ann was white-skinned with long black hair and a brilliant neon-blue-and-orange bathing suit on her little rump—you could have seen her in *a* mine at midnight. Even I got some yellow safety-tape and tied it around my arse and tanks.

"The one thing we didn't have then was a radio. At the time they didn't seem worth the crazy cost, and were unreliable besides. I had no way of guessing I'd soon give my life for one—and very nearly did.

"Well, when Victor let us out and we got organized and started north single file over the dead part of the reef, we almost surfaced and yelled for him to take us back right then. It was purely awful. But we knew there was better stuff ahead, so we stuck it out and flippered doggedly along—actually doing pretty damn fair time, with the current—and trying not to look too closely at what lay below.

"Not only was the coral dead, you understand—that's where the name got started. We think now it's from oil and chemical wash, such as that pretty ship out there is about to contribute—but there was tons and tons of litter, *basura* of all description, crusted there. It's everywhere, of course—you've seen what washes onto the mainland beach—but here the current and the reef produce a particularly visible concentration. Even quite large heavy things—bedsprings, auto chassis—in addition to things you'd expect, like wrecked skiffs. Cozumel, *Basurero del Caribe!*"

He gave a short laugh, mocking the Gem-of-the-Caribbean ads, as he lit up another *Caporal*. The most polite translation of *basura* is garbage can.

"A great deal of the older stuff was covered with that evil killer algae—you know, the big coarse

red-brown hairy kind, which means that nothing else can ever grow there again. But some of the heaps were too new.

"I ended by getting fascinated and swimming lower to look, always keeping one eye on that blue-and-orange rump above me with her white legs and black flippers. And the stuff—I don't mean just Clorox and *detergente* bottles, beer cans and netting—but weird things like about ten square meters of butchered pink plas-tic baby-dolls—arms and legs wiggling, and rosebud mouths—it looked like a babies' slaughter-house. Syringes, hypos galore. Fluorescent tubes on end, waving like drowned orchestra conductors. A great big red sofa with a skeletonized banana-stem or *something* sitting on it—when I saw that, I went back up and followed right behind Ann.

"And then the sun dimmed unexpectedly, so I surfaced for a look. The shoreline was fine, we had plenty of time, and the cloud was just one of a dozen little thermals that form on a hot afternoon like this. When I went back down Ann was looking at me, so I gave her the All's Fair sign. And with that we swam over a pair of broken dories and found ourselves in a different world—the beauty patch we'd been looking for.

"The reef was live here—whatever had killed the coral hadn't reached yet, and the damned *basura* had quit or been deflected, aside from a beer bottle or two. There was life everywhere; anemones, sponges, conches, fans, stars—and fish, oh my! No one ever came here, you see. In fact, there didn't seem to have been any spearing, the fish were as tame as they used to be years back.

"Well, we began zig-zagging back and forth, just reveling in it. And every time we'd meet head-on we'd make the gesture of putting our fingers to our lips, meaning, Don't tell anyone about this, ever!

"The formation of the reef was charming, too. It broadened into a sort of big stadium, with allees and cliffs and secret pockets, and there were at least eight different kinds of coral. And most of it was shallow enough so the sunlight brought out the glorious colors—those little black-and-yellow fish—butterflies, I forget their proper name—were dazzling. I kept having to brush them off my mask, they wanted to look in.

"The two ahead seemed to be in ecstasies; I expect they hadn't seen much like this before. They swam on and on, investigating it all—and I soon realized there was real danger of losing them in some coral pass. So I stuck tight to Ann. But time was passing. Presently I surfaced again to investigate—and, my god, the shoreline was damn near invisible and the line-up we had selected for our turn marker was all but passed! Moreover, a faint hazy overcast was rising from the west.

"So I cut down again, intending to grab Ann and start, which Harry would have to see. So I set off after the girl. I used to be a fair sprint swimmer, but I was amazed how long it took me to catch her. I recall vaguely noticing that the reef was going a bit bad again, dead coral here and there. Finally I came right over her, signed to her to halt, and kicked up in front of her nose for another look.

"To my horror the shoreline was gone and the overcast had overtaken the sun. We would have to swim east by compass, and swim hard. I took a moment to hitch my compass around where I could see it well—it was the old-fashioned kind—and then I went back down for Ann. And the damn fool girl wasn't there. It took me a minute to locate that blue bottom and white legs; I assumed she'd gone after Harry, having clearly no idea of the urgency of our predicament.

"I confess the thought crossed my mind that I could cut out of there, and come back for them later with Victor, but this was playing *a* rather iffy game with someone else's lives. And if they were truly unaware, it would be fairly rotten to take off without even warning them. So I went after Ann again—my god, I can still see that blue tail and the white limbs and black feet and hair with the light getting worse every minute

and the bottom now gone really rotten again. And as bad luck would have it she was going in just the worst line—north-north-west.

"Well, I swam and I swam and I *swam*. You know how a chase takes you, and somehow being unable to overtake a mere girl made it worse. But I was gaining, age and all, until just as I got close enough to sense something was wrong, she turned sidewise above two automobile tires—and I saw it wasn't a girl at all.

"I had been following a goddamned great fish—a fish with a bright blue-and-orange band around its belly, and a thin white body ending in a black flipperlike tail. Even its head and nape were black, like her hair and mask. It had a repulsive catfishlike mouth, with barbels.

"The thing goggled at me and then swam awkwardly away, just as the light went worse yet. But there was enough for me to see that it was no normal fish, either, but a queer archaic thing that looked more tacked together than grown. This I can't swear to, because I was looking elsewhere by then, but it was my strong impression that as it went out of my line of sight its whole tail broke off.

"But as I say, I was looking elsewhere. I had turned my light on, although I was not deep but only dim, because I had to ready my watch and compass. It had just dawned on me that I was very probably a dead man. My only chance, if you can call it that, was to swim east as long as I could, hoping for that eddy and Victor. And when my light came on, the first thing I saw was the girl, stark naked and obviously stone cold dead, lying in a tangle of nets and horrid stuff on the bottom ahead.

"Of Harry or anything human there was no sign at all. But there was a kind of shining, like a pool of moonlight, around her, which was so much stronger than my lamp that I clicked it off and swam slowly toward her, through the nastiest mess of *basura* I had yet seen. The very water seemed vile. It took longer to reach her than I had expected, and soon I saw why.

"They speak of one's blood running cold with horror, y'know. Or people becoming numb with horror piled on horrors. I believe I experienced both those effects. It isn't pleasant, even now." He lit a third *Caporal*, and I could see that the smoke column trembled. Twilight had fallen while he'd been speaking. A lone mercury lamp came on at the shore end of the pier; the one near us was apparently out, but we sat in what would ordinarily have been a pleasant tropic evening, sparkling with many moving lights—whites, reds, and green, of late-moving incomers, and the rainbow lighting from the jewel-lit cruise ship ahead, all cheerfully reflected in the unusually calm waters.

"Again I was mistaken, you see. It wasn't Ann at all; but the rather more distant figure of a young woman, of truly enormous size. All in this great ridge of graveyard luminosity, of garbage in phosphorescent decay. The current was carrying me slowly, inexorably, right toward her—as it had carried all that was there now. And perhaps I was also a bit hypnotized. She grew in my sight meter by meter as I neared her. I think six meters—eighteen feet—was about it, at the end... I make that guess later, you understand, as an exercise in containing the unbearable—by recalling the size of known items in the junkpile she lay on. One knee, for example, lay alongside an oil drum. At the time she simply filled my world. I had no doubt she was dead, and very beautiful. One of her legs seemed to writhe gently.

"The next stage of horror came when I realized that she was not a gigantic woman at all—or rather, like the fish, she was a woman-shaped construction. The realization came to me first, I think, when I could no longer fail to recognize that her 'breasts' were two of those great net buoys with their blue knobs for nipples.

"After that it all came with a rush—that she was a made-up body—all sorts of pieces of plastic, rope, styrofoam, netting, crates, and bolts—much of it clothed with that torn translucent white polyethylene for

skin. Her hair was a dreadful tangle of something, and her crotch was explicit and unspeakable. One hand was a torn, inflated rubber glove, and her face—well, I won't go into it except that one eye was a traffic reflector and her mouth was partly a rusted can.

"Now you might think this discovery would have brought some relief, but quite the opposite. Because simultaneously I had realized the very worst thing of all—

"She was alive."

He took a long drag on his cigarette.

"You know how things are moved passively in water? Plants waving, a board seesawing and so on? Sometimes enough almost to give an illusion of mobile life. What I saw was nothing of this sort.

"It wasn't merely that as I floated over, her horrible eyes 'opened' and looked at me and her rusted-can mouth *smiled*. Oh, no.

"What I mean is that as she smiled, first one whole arm, shed-ding junk, stretched up and reached for me *against the current*, and then the other did the same.

"And when I proved to be out of reach, this terrifying figure, or creature, or unliving life, actually sat up, again *against the current*, and reached up toward me with both arms at full extension.

"And as she did so, one of her 'breasts'—the right one—came loose and dangled by some tenuous thready stuff.

"All this seemed to pass in slow motion—I even had time to see that there were other unalive yet living things moving near her on the pile. Not fish, but more what I should have taken, on land, for rats or vermin—and I distinctly recall the paper-flat skeleton of something like a chicken, running and pecking. And other moving things like nothing in this world. I have remembered all this very carefully, y'see, from what must have been quick glimpses, because in actual fact I was apparently kicking like mad in a frenzied effort to get away from those dreadful reaching arms.

"It was not till I shot to the surface with a mighty splash that I came somewhere near my senses. Below and behind me I could still see faint cold light. Above was twilight and the darkness of an oncoming small storm.

"At that moment the air in my last tank gave out—or rather that splendid Yank warning buzz, which means you have just time to get out of your harness, sounded off.

"I had, thank god, practiced the drill. Despite being a terror-paralysed madman, habit got me out of the harness before the tanks turned into lethal deadweight. In my panic, of course, the headlight went down too. I was left unencumbered in the night, free to swim toward Cuba, or Cozumel, and to drown as slow or fast as fate willed.

"The little storm had left the horizon stars free. I recall that pure habit made me take a sight on what seemed to be Canopus, which should be over Cozumel. I began to swim in that direction. I was appallingly tired, and as the adrenalin of terror which had brought me this far began to fade out of my system, I realized I could soon be merely drifting, and would surely die in the next day's sun if I survived till then. Nevertheless it seemed best to swim whilst I could.

"I rather resented it when some time after a boat motor passed nearby. It forced me to attempt to yell and wave, nearly sinking myself. I was perfectly content when the boat passed on. But someone had seen—a spotlight wheeled blindingly, motors reversed, I

was forcibly pulled from my grave and voices from what I take to be your Texas demanded, roaring with laughter,"—here he gave quite a creditable imitation—" 'Whacha doin' out hyar, boy, this time of night? Ain't no pussy out hyar, less'n ya'all got a date with a mermaid.' They had been trolling for god knows what, mostly beer.

"The driver of that boat claimed me as a friend and later took me home for the night, where I told him—and to him alone—the whole story. He was Jorge Chuc.

"Next day I found that the young couple, Harry and Ann, had taken only a brief look at the charming unspoiled area, and then started east, exactly according to plan, with me—or something very much like me—following behind them all the way. They had been a trifle surprised at my passivity and uncommunicativeness, and more so when, on meeting Victor, I was no longer to be found. But they had taken immediate action, even set a full-scale search in progress—approximately seventy kilometers from where I then was. As soon as I came to myself I had to concoct a wild series of lies about cramps and heart trouble to get them in the clear and set their minds at ease. Needless to say, my version included no mention of diver-imitating fish-life."

He tossed the spark of his cigarette over the rail before us.

"So now, my friend, you know the whole story of all I know of what is to be found beyond the Dead Reef. It may be that others know of other happenings and developments there. Or of similar traps elsewhere. The sea is large... Or it may be that the whole yarn comes from neuroses long abused by stuff like this."

I had not seen him extract his flask, but he now took two deep, shuddering swallows.

I sighed involuntarily, and then sighed again. I seemed to have been breathing rather inadequately during the end of his account.

"Ordinary thanks don't seem quite appropriate here," I finally said. "Though I do thank you. Instead I am going to make two guesses. The second is that you might prefer to sit quietly here alone, enjoying the evening, and defer the mild entertainment I was about to offer you to some other time. I'd be glad to be proved wrong...?"

"No. You're very perceptive, I welcome the diverse—the deferred offer." His tongue stumbled a bit now, more from fatigue than anything he'd drunk. "But what was your first guess?"

I rose and slowly paced a few meters to and fro, remembering to pick up my absurd snorkel bag. Then I turned and gazed out to the sea.

"I can't put it into words. It has something to do with the idea that the sea is still, well, strong. Perhaps it can take revenge? No, that's too simple. I don't know. I have only a feeling that our ordinary ideas of what may be coming on us may be—oh—not deep, or broad enough. I put this poorly. But perhaps the sea, or nature, will not die passively at our hands... perhaps death itself may turn or return in horrible life upon us, besides the more mechanical dooms..."

"Our thoughts are not so far apart," the tall Belizan said. "I welcome them to my night's agenda."

"To which I now leave you, unless you've changed your mind?"

He shook his head. I hoisted his bag to the seat beside him. "Don't forget this. I almost left mine."

"Thanks. And don't you forget about dogs and mothers," he grinned faintly.

"Goodnight."

My footsteps echoed on the now deserted *muelle* left him sitting there, I was quite sure he was no longer smiling.

Nor was I.